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" Chronicle of Gandhi's Death: Lessons in Ahimsa and Beyond"

By
narendra raghunath

Pain and shame have always been powerful forces in human society. They are not just emotions; they function as tools of control. Throughout history, civilisations have relied on the fear of pain and the ability to cause pain or shame to regulate social life. Power often depends on this logic. Across the world, domination and persecution have been maintained through physical force, psychological pressure, and moral humiliation.

For a long time, Gandhi's idea of ahimsa deeply puzzled me. On the one hand, he strongly opposed violence and urged people to resist injustice without attacking their oppressors. On the other hand, he embraced self-inflicted suffering as a path to liberation. Through fasting and satyagraha, he subjected his own body to extreme torture and discipline. He also encouraged his followers to endure violence without retaliation, even if they were beaten or killed. This was not passive surrender. It was presented as a sacred sacrifice.

Gandhi believed that subjecting one's own body to suffering could be both a spiritual and political journey toward higher moral truth. Around the world, many religions include practices of self-denial and self-inflicted pain as offerings to God. Almost every religion speaks of sacrifice in some form. What confuses me is not the suffering itself, but the remarkable ability of ordinary people, in the name of faith, to detach themselves from their bodies and claim that the moral victory of the mind is superior to physical pain.

In many religious rituals, the body is disciplined through ritualistic infliction of pain for the well-being of the mind. In some spiritual traditions, the mind is controlled or purified through rigorous discipline for the well-being of the body. This constant struggle between mind and body underscores the centrality of pain to human existence. Within this tension, Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence becomes deeply complex. Even his death raises difficult philosophical questions.

From the perspective of constitutional law and modern ideas of mental health, harming oneself is not fundamentally different from harming others. Gandhi's repeated acts of fasting and self-denial, therefore, create a moral paradox. This question eventually led me to create the painting "Chronicle of Gandhi's Death".

It took me four months to complete. During that period, violence stayed in my mind like an epidemic. Having previously worked closely with Gujarat riot victims, I carried intense memories of pain and trauma. Completing the painting gave me clarity and strengthened my resolve.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the wrathful deity Vajrakilaya is seen as the remover of obstacles on the path to enlightenment. His imagery resembles that of the Hindu goddess Kali, though she is often depicted in Tantric form as a male–female union. Here again, violence, understood as the forceful removal of obstacles, appears as part of spiritual progress.

This paradox reflects the story of Gandhi and Godse. Historically, our country has often celebrated violence as heroism and personal triumph. Social hierarchy is frequently defined by one's ability either to inflict pain or to endure it. From a police constable to a DGP, from lower courts to the Supreme Court, from Panchayat ward members to the Prime Minister, from caste structures to school authorities, the power is structured around control, discipline, and the management of suffering.

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Gandhi understood this very early during his time in South Africa. In his autobiography, while describing the railway incident in Pietermaritzburg, he recognised that institutional power functions as organised violence over individuals. When an individual fearlessly accepts institutional violence or denies the institution the moral justification to exercise it, the structure of power becomes confused and unstable. Institutions depend on fear. When fear disappears, their legitimacy weakens.

However, Gandhi also understood that this moral vulnerability exists only within institutions guided by constitutional or religious morality. It cannot be expected from rogue or dictatorial systems.

His idea of ahimsa was therefore very different from the non-violence of the Buddha or Mahavira. Gandhi's non-violence was also a political strategy. Influenced by Tolstoy and Christian ethics, he mobilised large numbers of Indians willing to endure suffering, confronting an imperial Christian power with its own moral mirror. His method aimed to create guilt and shame within the oppressor's moral framework.

In this process, he reimagined Ram not as the warrior who defeats Ravana in battle, but as a figure closer to the crucified Christ, someone who consciously accepts violence rather than using it for victory. When Gandhi said, "You cannot hurt me without my permission," he made the politics of violence central to his philosophy. He transformed suffering into moral strength and dignity.

This approach was evident in many of his political actions, from the indigo farmers' struggle to the promotion of the charkha and swadeshi economics, and his preference for a decentralised micro-economy over a large-scale macro-economy. In each case, individual moral endurance confronted institutional power.

Yet this model required a specific condition: both the individual and the ruling system needed to possess some degree of constitutional or religious morality. When this condition failed, his method struggled. During chaotic communal violence, his approach became difficult to apply. His decision to suspend the Quit India movement after the Chauri Chaura incident showed his uncertainty when faced with uncontrolled mob violence lacking moral restraint.

Although Gandhi's Hinduism differed from majoritarian interpretations, and although his understanding of caste was not aligned with Manusmriti, he did not fully confront the systemic violence within the caste structure during the freedom struggle. Political convenience often limited social radicalism. His opposition to separate electorates under the Poona Pact reflects this tension between political unity and social justice. His writings, including "Why I Am a Hindu", suggest that his vision of the nation required a morally disciplined environment for his ahimsa to function effectively. He likely understood this limitation himself. During that period, ahimsa functioned primarily as a political tool.

A major transformation occurred during his time in Noakhali after Partition. Gandhi no longer faced a foreign imperial power. Both the victims and the perpetrators of violence were now his own people. His ahimsa had to shift from political resistance to social reconciliation.

Violence could no longer remain central. Reconciliation had to take priority. Instead of appealing to guilt and shame, he needed to encourage empathy and forgiveness. Reconciliation arises after violence; it is not born from normal harmony. Gandhi reportedly appointed even notorious rioters to head village reconciliation committees. In one case, a person accused of killing 42 people was given such responsibility. By then, Gandhi had begun evolving from political

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reformer to social healer. He appeared to recognise that violence only creates more anger, while reconciliation creates compassion.

Yet this transformation is rarely examined seriously. Many admirers and critics freeze Gandhi in his earlier political phase. The shift from sacrificial politics to restorative ethics complicates his legacy.

Reconciliation, however, depends heavily on religious morality. And religious morality in India has long coexisted with caste hierarchy. Gandhi never confronted caste oppression with the same intensity that he directed against British imperial rule. There is no major instance in his life where he fought caste oppressors with equal force.

It is possible that caste would have become his next major struggle had he lived longer. Given his ability to reinvent himself, such a shift was not impossible.

Instead, majoritarian forces committed to revenge ended his life. Violence once again became central to the nation's identity. Many of his followers entered government and constitutional institutions, where the power to discipline and punish continued to define hierarchy. Violence, rather than reconciliation, remained dominant.

If Gandhi had lived a few more years without being killed by those driven by retribution, perhaps reconciliation might have gained stronger roots in our public life. Instead, the culture of revenge continues to influence politics and society.

That unfinished possibility remains something worth reflecting upon.

Chronicle of Gandhi's death, oil on canvas, 2010